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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000840

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER VYACHORKA PRAISES USG EFFORTS,
LOOKS TO JANUARY 2007 LOCAL ELECTIONS

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore For Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In their first meeting, Belarusian opposition leader Vyachorka asserted to Charge on August 2 that United Democratic Forces (UDF) members were united behind UDF leader Aleksandr Milinkevich and are recruiting and mobilizing a growing number of citizens frustrated with the regime. The UDF plans to use the campaigns for local elections, planned for January 2007, as a legal channel to educate citizens nationwide on economic problems due to Lukashenko's leadership. Vyachorka praised U.S. and EU visa bans and asset freezes as being effective instruments of pressure on the regime, but would like to see greater effort in broadcasting independent radio programs deeper into Belarus. End Summary.

¶2. (C) BNF leader and member of the UDF Political Council Vintsuk Vyachorka asserted that the UDF had become widely known as the alternative to President Aleksandr Lukashenko. He told Charge that creating the UDF had not been easy, but after two years of work they were finally united behind the leader and face of the UDF, Aleksandr Milinkevich.

UDF United

¶3. (C) When Charge inquired further about the UDF's "unity," Vyachorka admitted that it was impossible to bring all opposition groups together, particularly jailed opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin and his Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP). Vyachorka cited the recent motions from United Civic Party leader Anatoly Lebedko and Belarusian Communist Party leader Sergey Kalyakin to hold a second congress of democratic forces to choose a new leader. According to Vyachorka, most UDF leaders believe a second congress would be a waste of energy and resources and the proposal seems to be dead. However, the UDF's inner squabbles were small and controllable and simply the result of too many personal ambitions. Vyachorka claimed the UDF has plenty of room for all leaders and their ambitions, and although Milinkevich is the UDF leader, he is not a dictator.

Election Strategy

¶4. (C) Vyachorka maintained that the UDF's institutions (i.e., the Political Council and Secretariat) were intact and actively working towards democratic change. The UDF's strategy is to use the January 2007 local municipal election campaign as a legal channel to raise awareness countrywide on Belarus' current and future problems (i.e., probable rise in energy prices, lack of investment, bankruptcy) and convince citizens that the only solution is a free Belarus. Vyachorka claimed that frustration with the regime was growing and

affecting demographic groups who were traditionally apolitical, such as independent entrepreneurs. According to Vyachorka, informal entrepreneurial networks have expressed greater interest in working with the UDF, and they possess enough energy to serve as the spark for widespread calls for democratic change. Although the UDF plans to help select and support candidates, the UDF doubts any will be elected.

U.S. Support

¶ 5. (C) When asked about USG support, policy, and approach to Belarus, Vyachorka stated enthusiastically that the UDF appreciates the U.S. constant support and the democratic values it shares with the UDF. Vyachorka enthusiastically confirmed that the Belarusian Democracy Act, joint U.S.-EU visa bans, and asset freezes were working even better than the UDF anticipated. Elderly women on the trolleybuses can be heard discussing visa bans, militia officers are always wondering whether they are on the list, and colonels ask if the list applies to them or only to the generals, Vyachorka said; these measures are a slap in the face for the Lukashenko regime.

¶ 6. (C) When asked by the Charge, Vyachorka's one-word answer for things the USG can do to further promote change was "information." He told Charge he would like to see a range of coordinated FM broadcasts from Poland, Lithuania, Latvia (but does not expect similar from Ukraine or Russia) to better inform as many Belarusians as possible. Among others, he cited Radio Racija and RFE/RL as ideal participants.

Comment

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¶ 7. (C) While we suspect that we are often told what we want to hear, Vyachorka reaffirmed what Emboffs have heard in other meetings, primarily that the UDF has moved away from debates about a second congress and is focusing on the local elections planned for January 2007. The UDF Political Council has made some progress by agreeing on a general strategy document and a six-month action plan for promoting democratic change. The Secretariat seems to be moving ahead with implementation. The successful impact of UDF efforts mainly hinges on a focused and united coalition and an attractive message to key interest groups, such as entrepreneurs and youth. In upcoming meetings with his senior opposition colleagues, we hope to hear similar messages and get more concrete indications of progress.

Moore